

"THE STORY OF OUR LIVES FROM YEAR TO YEAR"

# ALL THE YEAR ROUND

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## GERALD.

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### CHAPTER XXX. THE OLD DUTCH HOUSE.

COLONEL and Mrs. Forester had a pleasant little English-looking house with a verandah, looking out on fresh-leaved oak-trees. All the front was clustered over with early roses, and there were aloes and other strange plants in the garden. To the right, not far away, towered the great dark wall of Table Mountain. Here Theo spent her first few days of Africa. Gerald was with her constantly, and, after the first almost painful excitement of meeting again, they were both perfectly happy.

Poor Combe was happy, too, in being on dry land again, and in adding various things to her mistress's outfit under Mrs. Forester's directions; but she was much plagued with anxiety about the future, for Mrs. Lee had poisoned her mind.

Gerald had, of course, made his own arrangements for his marriage, in case Theo really came to him. He had consulted some friendly people at the Fields, and they had been quite sure she would come. By their advice he meant to take her to St. George's Hotel, to get a special license, and be married at the cathedral in the next day or two; the captain of her ship would probably consent to give her away. So far, these easily-made plans were knocked on the head by the intervention of Mrs. Forester; it had never struck him that Theo would have any friends of her own, and at first he was inclined to think the good Foresters a bore; but these ungrateful thoughts soon vanished.

His friends at the Fields had done him one real kindness: they had offered to lend him a house at Wynberg, that pleasant

place eight miles from Cape Town. Here he and Theo could have a fortnight of perfect peace before they began the weary journey to their new home.

Mrs. Forester approved highly of this part of his arrangements. She only wished that the marriage could have been put off a little longer, for she had discovered, in her talks with Theo, how very slight her knowledge of Gerald was, and his of her. No wonder, indeed, that her relations disapproved of her doings. But it was too late now; too late even for delay, when neither of these young people agreed with her in seeing any reason for it. Colonel Forester laughed a little at his wife's anxieties; he liked Gerald, and was sure now that everything would go well.

"He is a gentleman. He's not one of your digger fellows; she is not throwing herself away," he said consolingly.

"She would never have done that," said Mrs. Forester. "I should not be afraid if they were not going to that savage place. She is the stronger spirit, Arthur, and that ought not to be."

"You are a little hard on Kimberley; they say it is improving."

Mrs. Forester shook her head; she would not be comforted.

Gerald and Theo were married in the cathedral at eight o'clock one morning, and stayed with their friends to the service afterwards. It was the quietest wedding; no one was there but Colonel Forester, his wife, and the faithful Combe. A young officer came as Gerald's friend, who had met him accidentally in Adderley Street, and remembered him in his army days.

Theo was not in a dream that morning, as she had been at Helen's wedding so long ago, when she woke up to find Gerald looking at her. She was not the brilliant beauty she had been then, lovely in satin

and flowers, holding her head very high, and looking out scornfully upon the world. Things had changed indeed; she had gone through a good deal since then, and she was beginning to know that life was a subject for patience, not scorn.

Yet, perhaps, she was more beautiful now; a little pale, a little sad, in the plain white dress she had brought with her, and her sweet face expressing, more than any other feeling, a perfect earnestness. There were no half-measures with Theo; she had once given herself to Gerald, and therefore she belonged to him, and she had not hesitated to follow his fortunes. After they were married, he looked at her anxiously, for in all his happiness he was almost frightened at what he had done. She was so beautiful, there was such a proud grace in her gentleness; and what sort of life would she have to lead now? But she looked up at him with a light in her eyes which reminded him of that day in the cloister at Locarno, and he began to know that in her less demonstrative way she was as happy as himself.

Later in the day, they drove off in a cart to Wynberg, Colonel Forester having undertaken to see that Combe and the luggage went safely by railway to the same point. The day was not very hot, though the sun shone brightly; Theo still wore her white gown, and they were sheltered by the head of the high two-wheeled cart. Their Malay driver sat in front, wearing a blue coat and a great straw hat, like a pyramid.

Her few days in Cape Town had accustomed Theo to the sight of Malays and black people. They, in their lazy picturesqueness, with white teeth for ever laughing, and decked out with bright-coloured handkerchiefs, seemed to belong quite rightly to the brilliant sunshine and black shadows, the enervating softness of the air, the gorgeous fruit and flowers which heaped the market and the little stalls by the roadside. Everyone here seemed to be playing at life, playing at work, not living or working. Gerald said it would be an awful thing to live at Cape Town, but Theo was not so sure. In the strange mixture of her character there was something that understood the feeling of the lotus-eaters, and she was a little tired and languid after the summer just ended, which was going to begin again for her.

The black people looked up and laughed at them as they drove along. Other carts drove by, with jingling bells, and the

people in them put their heads out and laughed too. They met waggons drawn by long teams of mules, which plunged and kicked, and were as lazy as the natives; long whips were cracked, and there was a great deal of shouting. Beyond all the dirt, and noise, and colour of the town—they had to drive through the Malay quarter—Table Mountain rose dark and sombre, with clouds about him, and the Lion lay watching, and misty mountains far away looked soft and blue.

Then they drove on through a wind-swept country, with straggling trees all blown one way, a sandy tract between the mountains and the sea. White sails were flashing away on the blue water, and the waves were breaking on white sand. Beyond this, they came to low, white villas in shady gardens, with agapanthus growing, and other strange, solid-looking flowers that Theo had never seen. Then on past vineyards, where handsome Malays kept little fruit-stalls by the roadside, then through a shady road where the sunbeams glinted softly through the thick twigs of budding oak-trees.

At one place they came to a bridge with a stream far down below, where some Kafirs with red handkerchiefs on their heads were beating clothes on stones. Gerald and Theo reminded each other of the washerwomen at Locarno.

"But I was wretched when I saw those women, for I hadn't got you then, and now I have," said Gerald. "So I like this better than Locarno, and the blackies better than those good Swiss. Don't you? Wouldn't you rather be here?"

The question hardly seemed to want an answer.

"I don't know why anyone should ever be afraid of Africa," Theo said presently.

They were both silent, and looked round. Certainly in no country could the sun shine and the air breathe more sweetly; crickets, if not birds, were singing all along the sides of the road, which ran now red and sandy through tall, dark pine-trees. Presently this perfect peace was disturbed by meeting a Malay fish-cart tearing along the road with hideous noises on a horn made of sea-weed. As this instrument passed away into the distance, it was like a fog-horn at sea.

Then came silence again, and presently they turned into a shady lane, and then into a long, quaint avenue of willows; then crossed a bridge over a stream, and stopped in a wild garden at the foot of a

flight of broad old steps. These led up to the "stoep," a kind of raised terrace or balcony, in front of an old Dutch house, with white, rough-cast walls, and a roof of thick, dark thatch.

There were flowers everywhere: all along the stoep stood pots of flowers; down below, by the bank of the stream, was a hedge of blue plumbago; roses and geraniums, just coming into flower, grew in wild clumps and masses all about. And the sun shone over it all, and everything seemed to lie quietly basking, while the crickets sang loudly, and the water flowed with a gentle swirl; and Combe, the only creature who was not quite happy there, came forward from the open door to receive her mistress.

The bride had kissed her that morning when she had done dressing her—a difficult task with eyes blinded by tears.

Theo knew very well what was poor old Combe's chief trouble, how she felt that this African business was her fault, just as much as Lady Redcliff's. If she had had a little more courage, a little more faithfulness! But all the reproach came from herself, none from her mistress, who was only more gentle and considerate than ever.

"I wish this was home, Theo, after all," Gerald whispered to his wife as he brought her up the steps. "The house at the Fields is very different, you know."

"Don't talk about it now; let me love this," said Theo.

They went into the hall with its brown polished floor and panelling, and then into the rooms that opened from it on each side, all cool, quiet, dark, with Venetian shutters closed. There were flowers on the tables, on the deep window-seats—everywhere. The drawing-room was the least attractive room in the house, for it was furnished in an English upholsterer's fashion of a few years ago, with an elegant suite of blue damask; but the drawing-room did not affect the happiness of these people much.

That day began a little idyl in their lives; they both believed that nobody had ever had such a honeymoon before. The wildness, the remoteness, the newness, the touch of adventure in the whole thing, the doubts and difficulties through which they had made their way to each other; all this, real as it was, gave life a wonderful feeling of romance. Of course they had done a very foolish thing; Gerald knew that when he allowed himself to think for

a moment—for he was more prudent and less high-spirited than Theo—but she was so calm and fearless about the future that he almost ceased to fear it for her, and the untroubled peace in her eyes made him too happy to be anxious. After all, they could not have lived away from each other. What did a few little outward hardships matter, compared with such a heartbreak as that?

They talked a great deal about the past and the future as those short sweet days flew by. It was rather delightful to find that, after all, they knew so little of each other, and had such endless discoveries to make. Every day was more beautiful, more dreamlike, than the one before it, and every day there were more flowers, and the sun was warmer, and they found some new charming corner about their old house and garden to waste the hours in. It was only for a fortnight. Theo forgot that it must ever end, giving herself up to the languid charm of those long afternoons. Gerald was more restless; all among those rose thickets he was haunted by the thought of a barren, treeless land, with dust-clouds blowing, and he grudged every minute of that golden time at Wynberg, which must so soon be left behind.

They used to sit for hours on the grass near the stream where the roses grew, and the blue plumbago hedge looked like a fairy wall to keep the world out. Then they would stray on a little farther to a delightful sunny slope where strawberries grew, and they were quite young enough to care for strawberries. On more energetic days they would wander on through a shade of pine-trees, out upon the flats, where they could see misty mountain-ranges far away, and the low ground was covered with wild flowers. Theo found a lovely arum growing in a puddle, and dreamed over it for some minutes before she called Gerald, who was gathering heaths for her a few yards away.

At night the Southern Cross and all the stars shone down upon them as they sat out on the stoep, and the crickets sang, and the flowers were sweeter than in the daylight; and so time went on till the last evening came, and they sat there talking about Ada. Gerald was explaining how he had left her money enough for a year; he was a little surprised to find that Theo knew as much about Ada's arrangements as he did himself.

"Since last spring," said Theo, "she has

belonged to me as much as to you, remember."

"I believe that was why—I believe you like her better than me," said Gerald, laughing.

"She deserves it more—don't you think so? Seriously, though, I think it was a pity she did not come out with me. The child can't be very happy left alone at Mrs. Keene's."

"Well, I don't know," said Gerald, feeling that he did not particularly want Ada just now.

Theo looked up with a smile in her eyes.

"You don't know!" she said. "Selfish, jealous, grasping! I know that I should like to have my dear little Ada, and if Kimberley is not much worse than this, and if you seem likely to make your fortune there, we will send for her in the spring."

"Not much worse than this! Dear, you don't know what you are talking about," said Gerald dismally. "You idealise things in a wonderful way, but that will be beyond your powers."

"Then why are you tired of being here, and anxious to get there?" asked Theo quietly.

"How can you say so!" exclaimed Gerald, astonished.

"Don't I know? You are beginning to find it all monotonous—flowers, and strawberries, and everything. Now, I could stay here in a dream of perfect peace—till it rains."

"It is not monotonous. I hate the thought of leaving it," said Gerald earnestly. "I know I shall never be so happy again. But it must end, you see; it's ended now almost; and at the other place there's lots of work and life going on. I'm afraid I'm not lazy by nature, Theo. I suppose you are."

"Never so happy again!" repeated Theo in her low, dreamy voice. "Is that what you feel? As for me, I mean to go on being happier and happier. What does it matter where one is, after all?"

Gerald somehow had not any words for an answer to this.

"And do you really think I'm going to make my fortune?" he said after a time.

"Why not?" said Theo.

"Listen, darling: I'll tell you something. I don't know whether you will forgive me. The man who lent us this house—he is a banker there, you know, and he knows more about that part of the country than

most people—he told me, just before I started off to meet you, after I had bought the house and settled everything, that he believed this company of ours would turn out a complete failure. He says it is much too soon to think of building decent houses at the Fields. In another twenty years or so, when the railway has got there, so that the cost of transport is not quite so enormous, it will be a different thing, but at present it is a speculation that won't pay. In fact, he made me very sorry that I had ever had anything to do with it, for it is like most of Clarence's affairs, you see—it doesn't stand on its own feet. A good many people will be taken in, and then the smash will come. The directors may get something out of it, or they may not. Now, you see, Theo, I have brought you out to this. I can hold on to this concern, or I can throw it over, as you please. I don't want to go back to England; I don't feel as if I could now. But, do you see, there was not time to stop you. If there had been, I don't know—Are you sorry?"

Gerald told this story in rather a disjointed manner, with many stops, in a low voice, in the starlight.

Theo was not sorry. She made him understand that.

"No wonder you are restless. Why didn't you tell me before?" she said. "I think you must throw it over. But what can you do?"

"He offered me a temporary clerkship in the bank," said Gerald, half ashamed. "But of course I must write home first; I can't settle anything yet. There is another resource which might make life worth living at Kimberley. You will see when you get there."

"Diamonds—like Mr. Lee," said Theo. "I don't think I like that, Gerald."

"Well, don't let us talk about it any more now. If you forgive me for bringing you to such a country and such a life as this, I don't care about anything else. Do you—do you really?"

"You didn't bring me; I came," whispered Theo. "And it is my country and my life, Gerald."

## OUR SHINING RIVER.

VL

WE are to meet at Ifley Lock, so says a telegram just received from Mrs. Pyecroft. But Charlwood won't be there, as she hopes. I have just seen the whole party



off, Cleopatra radiant and charming, her parents in the best of tempers, and the Boothbys too. They have struck up a sudden friendship with the Thomas family, and have joined their party, and all have gone off in a steam-launch from Salter's Yard. It is a soft, steaming, misty morning, and I hear the fussy little launch trumpeting loudly in the distance. All is soft and indistinct; the canal-like street, the houses jutting on the water, the misty masses of foliage, the meadows all in vapour, the barges looming out like floating bergs. The scene is more imposing thus than when the morning mist has cleared away, and everything is fully revealed in the garish sunlight. For Oxford is not at all a riverside city. All the grand effects that are possible with fine masses of buildings and a shining river through the midst have no existence here. In his way under the city walls, Thames becomes slummy and even gloomy. The fine castle-mound is a scratching-place for cocks and hens, and the one square Norman tower that shows with something like effect from the river is encompassed by the mock battlements of a common gaol. All that is noble and grand in Oxford has been withdrawn from the river, and it is only poetic justice that the pilgrims who pass along the stream should neglect the city which has turned its back upon the mother stream that gave it birth.

But the one part of Oxford that really seems to have affinity with the river is Christchurch, with its pleasant meadows and its old priory church of St. Frideswide—too small to be of much account as a cathedral, but with exquisite detail of Norman work, a bit of Caen or Bayeux transplanted bodily upon these meadows of middle England. This little bit of Oxford, with the hall, the staircase, the kitchens of Christchurch in pleasant, if incongruous juxtaposition; gloomy courts and resounding staircases; and the curious mixture of mediæval and modern life with the gleam of the meadows beyond, and the consciousness of old Father Thames in the distance, make up a picture to be long retained in memory, altogether pleasant and in keeping with the history of our pilgrimage.

A pretty constant stream of visitors filters through these old precincts, guide-book in hand: fresh young couples from the shires around, honeymooning, or otherwise mooning the happy hours away; bearded Germans, Baedeker in hand, and

Frenchmen intent on Joanne; Americans, too, with some succinct handbook that sums up the world in a pocket form, with a paragraph for the Pyramids and half a line for Peckwater Quad; then there is a fanatic in woodwork, who has come half a thousand miles to see the new bishop's settle, otherwise the episcopal throne, and who stands there entranced—or perhaps he is only meditating some scathing criticism for a trade journal. Then there is an artist, who has pitched his easel in a quiet nook, and is working out some effect of light and shade. Add to the tremolo of the footsteps and whispers of pilgrims and the rustling of leaves from outside, the subdued clatter of workmen's hammers, and the rattle of the great metal pipes which are being lifted in and out of the organ-case, and you have a mixture of bustle and tranquillity, of noise and stillness, that encourages one to linger amongst the shades of St. Frideswide. Bishop and chapter, canons, choristers, bursars, and bedells are all in vacancy, they have vanished into air, or are over the hills and far away; and in all this present scene, in the succession of pilgrims, in the noise and bustle of workmen, and the mingled sunshine and shadow, we seem to be on closer terms than usual with a vanished past, with the days when the scholars were not, and when the pious country people came to bring their oblations to the shrine of their favourite Princess and Saint.

Almost unique as a survival of the storms of the Reformation is the actual shrine of the saint, with a curious carved chamber over it, and there is a grim repose in the whole aspect of the church, with its monuments of founders and benefactors—here a stately Countess of the Plantagenet Court, there a grim prior with his crozier, or else some battered knight who followed the Black Prince to the wars, and whose strong aquiline features and vacuous expression record his descent from those Norman Vikings who combined so much sound sense with such shallow brains. Here they sleep soundly enough, these people of the old times, and reck nothing of the changes that have taken place. Silent monks or noisy undergraduates are all the same to them, and they rest just as well as when masses were daily sung for their repose.

Not so much in keeping, perhaps, but still pleasant, is the outside of a tramway-car, with its graduated fares that sound strangely enough to those familiar with the

dignified Oxford of a few years ago. A penny to Carfax, another penny to Magdalen, and a third to Cowley Marsh; but the first two stages hardly to be matched for interest, with a succession of street scenes, dignified ancient colleges, with the modern shops and houses intermingling with the charmingly roccoco porch of St. Mary's, with the twisted columns, suggesting the long and empty wind of centuries of University sermons preached within—most memorable of all, perhaps, the sermon Cranmer was compelled to listen to, apropos of his own execution that was presently to follow.

But at the present moment the people most in the ascendant are the college servants. The hour of their deliverance has sounded, and the helots are in possession of the citadel. For them the four-horse break with the winding-horn that dashes down the High and over Folly Bridge; for them the garden-party in the college gardens; for them the excursion-steamer chartered for Nuneham or Mapledurham. The college-porter drops his float into the quiet Cherwell, and dreams away the hours, undisturbed by thoughts of gates or chapels; the scout is reconnoitring the river-banks, and smoking his pipe, perhaps, on the sacred university barge.

There they lie, all still, silent, and deserted, those college barges, which all the summer long have been alive with shouts and laughter, with the passing to and fro of boats, and the landing and embarking of men in white flannels. The river-bank is as still as a church, except for some urchins fishing for sticklebacks, and the boat-builders' men who are overhauling the long frail-looking boats, before dismissing them for their long vacation. There is only one boat to be seen on the river, passing along towards Ifley, and that particular boat is redolent, too, of the *dolce far niente* of the long vacation. First comes the tracker, as riverside people are disposed to call the man who tows, a stout, good-tempered looking gardener, who takes more kindly to his occupation than our Peter does; and in the boat that floats placidly along sits a pleased and placid dignitary of the church, in his broad, clerical hat, the yoke-lines over his shoulders, while in her best Paisley shawl, on the very edge of the forward thwart, sits the housekeeper, with an air of pleased bashfulness and withdrawal from any cause of offence; the housekeeper's daughter, too, a pretty black-eyed girl, nestles under her mother's wing,

and altogether here is what you might fancy a clerical household of the good old times, ere the Reformation had introduced wives and dissensions into country parsonages.

The sun shines pleasantly on the meadows, and on the men who are cutting weeds in the river—a grand harvest of weeds, barge-loads upon barge-loads of them, an especial development of energy this weed-cutting, very local in its manifestation. For now that we are fairly, if not yet embarked, anyhow on the banks of the navigable water-way, it is rather melancholy to see how the navigability of it is gradually passing away. Indeed, if it were not for the pleasure-boats, the river would already be a watery ruin, its locks dismantled and deserted, its weirs only cared for by the miller; with occasional holes and deeps where the fishermen might congregate; but otherwise abandoned and desolate, of no further use, except as a feeder of water-works and canals. As it is, you are met at every point with notices that people using the tow-path must take it as they find it, and if they can't find it at all, if it has tumbled bodily into the river, or been annexed by some fierce riparian proprietor demanding black-mail, such a little contretemps is to be taken quietly and thankfully, as part of our necessary probation.

And yet, if we could take a bird's-eye view of the course of the river from Ifley Lock to Teddington, instead of decadence and decay, the scene would be one of almost unalloyed pleasantness and prosperity; in every reach a succession of gay pleasure-boats: house-boats, with their bright trappings, lining every pleasant wooded bank; launches darting up and down; sailing-boats catching each puff of wind in their white sails; while in every pool and backwater rows of punts are occupied by silent fishermen, and every isle and eyot is whitened with the tents of those who camp by the way. All this in the sunshine of a summer's day; for let a cold wind ruffle the water and whiten the willows, and send an angry shiver through the trees, while driving showers make all dark and dreary, and then all the tropical glow and brightness of river-life disappears with magic suddenness, to reappear with the swarm of insect-life when the sun shines once more, and the dreary hour is past.

It is difficult to regret the disappearance of the sterner element of the scene in

the loaded barge, the overworked horse straining on the tow-path, the heavy tow-rope—a terror to the light canoe—and the sullen bargee, reckless in the strength of his unwieldy craft—never more to be chaffed in connection with Marlow Bridge, or to vex the souls of oarsmen in Henley Reach. Such as survive are mild-mannered men, who own a boat or two, and job up and down, generally disposed to give a friendly tow to toilers against stream—civilities often more profitable, perhaps, than their regular traffic.

Well, at Itfley, the pleasure-traffic of the river fairly opens. Above Oxford, the sight of a boat is something of an event, but here we begin to get into the stream of them; and here, too, the river assumes a character of its own. Here is the lock, cool and inviting in the summer heat, with the old mill, weather-stained and water-worn, with its rushing stream and hollowly resounding wheel, and above, the tuft of trees, with the church-tower peeping out hoary and grey, and the red roofs of house and cottage. Just a place this for the miller of Chaucer's Tales, with the clerks of Oxenford looming in the distance, as witness those towers and spires we saw reflected in the water just above.

A little covered wooden bridge leads from the lock island to the mainland on the other side, and the bridge has a wicket-gate at one end, where hangs a bell-handle. A bell to a miller's mind must be suggestive of want of grist, for does not there ring a bell whenever the hopper runs empty, and in this case the bell is not rung for nothing, for our feudal miller levies a penny toll on all who pass this way. But it is worth the money to enter the village in such a suggestive way—the approach by the dusty highway may be commonplace enough, but in this way we get a Pilgrim's Progress flavour. We have left the village of Morality behind us—in which possibly Oxford may be foreshadowed—and we are at the foot of the Hill Difficulty—while beyond the Delectable Mountains, somewhere about Nuneham Courteney, are shining in the distance.

And really this kind of feeling is hardly dissipated as the church is reached, with its pleasant well-kept graveyard, with its church, a quaint and antique gem, set in the midst of the emerald-green. But hardly had the churchyard-gate clacked behind the pilgrim, when over the churchyard wall peered a man with wrinkled, ancient visage, but a smiling, deferential

bearing, who addressed the stranger with all the freedom of a fellow-pilgrim.

"Ah yes, sir, there's a good deal in this place that nobody knows anything about but me. I'm eighty-five—eighty-five years I've known the place, and none of them can say that; why, you might think that these were Ilford people buried here, but I know better. Why, they're mostly Littleton folk lie here, and I can tell you all about them—eighty-five years——"

But my experience of the Pilgrim's Progress had taught that the pleasant inviting words that reach the wayfarer are to be received with caution, as often not tending to profit. Still, there was the church wall between us, so that Mr. Ancient-Know-all could hardly seize me by the button like the Ancient Mariner, or jump upon my shoulders like the Old Man of the Sea. But while I was thinking how I should test the old gentleman's memory with some event such as Magna Charta, or the Habeas Corpus, only being a little doubtful about the dates myself—old Mr. Know-all suddenly disappeared behind the church wall. The reason of Mr. Know-all's flight was not far to seek. A portly dame—a very portly dame—was approaching from among the graves, a dame who was evidently at least deputy-sexton, if not assistant-churchwarden; Madame Holdfast-by-the-law, I dare say our friend John would have named her.

"Did you happen to read what was writ on that theer boord, mister?" pointing to a notice-board by the gate.

And then as I stood aghast, not quite sure as to what penalty had been incurred. Madame Holdfast continued, pointing to the pipe that was giving forth a grateful fume from the corner of my mouth:

"No smooking allowed, that's what it says on the boord. I don't say it, mind ye—but the boord says so; we must go by what the boord says. No offence, sir, begging your pardon."

"Why should not one smoke in a churchyard? Personally, if lying there and conscious in any way of mortal affairs, I should be grateful to anyone giving me the whiff of tobacco; but, perhaps, there are Littleton folk who object!"

Madame Holdfast sympathises cordially, but holds fast by the "boord." And when the obnoxious pipe is extinguished, the portly dame becomes quite genial, and offers her company in exploring the church and grounds.

I dare say Madame Holdfast has chatted often enough with crack archæologists and antiquarians with any number of letters to their name; and she has acquired a good deal of their lore. For Ifley is quite a show church in its way—a little casket of early Romanesque work, in all its somewhat grotesque efforts after richness and beauty, and its quaint, original details have been copied into most of the text-books of the day. Beakheads and all kinds of queer old mouldings over the rich, round, arched doorways Madame Holdfast points out with quite appreciative knowledge. "And not one of 'em alike, 'least they're all alike, but not one jest the same as another."

All this time Mr. Know-all had kept well out of the way, although his venerable head appeared over the wall every now and then.

"It's quite sickening to hear the old gentleman run on as he do, with his eighty-five years old," quoth Madame Holdfast, and then leads me into the church, a simple chapel, one would call it, without transept or apse, but wonderfully rich in its early decoration, with a double round-headed arch dividing the church into three longitudinal parts. "Must have taken a wonderful lot of pains in those ancient days," suggests Mrs. Holdfast in her "handbook" manner.

Again, there is an organ being tuned and repaired, in sympathy with Christ Church; a marvellous organ this, for the clever way in which it is packed up aloft, there not being room to swing a cat across the church, and from somewhere up among the pipes proceeds a voice from some invisible form, while somebody else sits at the keyboard and sounds a note in obedience to the cherub aloft. "Do!" cries the muffled voice of the cherub. "Do!" repeats the organ-pipe, but it is a "Do" that will not quite do, and after some rapping and scrooping, "Do!" cries the cherub again, and "Do!" sounds on the organ, but doesn't get quite right as long as we are there, which shows, if Madame Holdfast could take the moral to heart, that people take plenty of pains in these modern degenerate days.

Quite sure was I that I had escaped Mr. Ancient-Know-all, for he was quite on the other side as I left the churchyard, and hurried through the village, anxious to reach the lock again, lest I should miss the Pyecroft boat. All the same, at the end of the village, a head popped up from behind

a hedge, and a cracked and faded voice exclaimed:

"Did you happen to see my brother when you were up in the village?"

Evidently there are two of them.

"Was your brother a talkative old gentleman—good deal like you in appearance?"

"Oh dear no, not old at all, not by four years so old as me. I'm eighty-five, and I've known——"

But what the old gentleman had known, or whether he was the same old gentleman whom I had seen in the churchyard, or whether there were two of them, brothers who disputed with each other the palm of age, will always remain a mystery. The hedge was thin, and there was even a gap in it, and dreading the fate of Sindbad the Sailor, I took to my heels.

"At last then you have come?" cried mademoiselle, claspings her hands in thankfulness. "Then we shall not collapse altogether."

"And Charlwood?" asked Mrs. Pyecroft anxiously. "When is he coming to join us?"

"By the way," queried Mr. Pyecroft with an assumption of an indifferent manner, "did you chance to see anything of Boothby in Oxford?"

As for Claudia, she said nothing, but I thought that she looked satisfied and happy now that I had joined the party once more. Perhaps that was because she now felt sure of going on; for mademoiselle now informed me in confidence that the voyage from Bablock Hithe ferry had hardly been a success. Mr. Pyecroft had essayed to row, but rheumatism had caught him in the back, and when he enlisted a substitute—a loiterer on the bank—this substitute proved to be rather gone in drink, and so they had been once or twice perilously near shipwreck.

"We are too old, in fact," said Mrs. Pyecroft with a smile, "too old for these athletic exercises, but Claudia must not be disappointed. We will drive along from place to place, and meet you at the end of the day's journey."

And this arrangement seemed to please everybody. And for my own part I felt my responsibility greatly lightened. We could pass under the very noses of the rival party without being obliged to take any notice of them. But I had not yet answered Mrs. Pyecroft's question as to Charlwood, and presently she called me



aside and cross-examined me as to what had passed between us.

"And he is still under the dominion of that girl?" she cried between firmly-compressed lips. "Well, we must rescue him, that is all. Between you on the river and us on the shore, he will hardly be able to evade us."

"And Boothby?" whispered Mr. Pyecroft, taking me by the arm as we were separating on our respective ways. "Did you see anything of him?"

"Oh yes," I replied; "we dined together." But I said nothing of his being with the Thomases.

If the conjunction augured ill for Mr. Pyecroft—though, indeed, I could not see how—he would hear of it soon enough, and it would be a pity to spoil the pleasure of his journey by anticipating evil that might never come to pass.

We started from Ifley Lock gaily enough. Mrs. Pyecroft, delighted at being fairly established on terra-firma, declared that she thought she could walk the distance to Abingdon.

"My dear," said Mr. Pyecroft gravely, "an Empress has done the same thing for your example. The Empress Maude, you will remember, escaped from Oxford Castle, crossing the frozen river and the snowy country, and evading the sharp eyes of her enemies by dressing herself and her attendants in white garments, and thus by night, and on foot, they reached the hospitable gates of the monks of Abingdon. Now, my dear Claudia," pursued Mr. Pyecroft, addressing the boat from the bank, "had that enterprise failed, had the Empress been taken prisoner, the whole course of English history would have been changed. We should have had no Plantagenet Kings."

But here the splash of oars put an end to the dissertation.

"Now, then, come along," cried the lock-keeper, "if you are going through!"

And we came along accordingly. Claudia was delighted as we next reached Sandford Lock, and sank down into a real deep lock. It was the nearest approach, she declared, to the adventure of the princesses who sank down every night into some subterranean fairyland, where they danced the soles of their shoes away before morning.

And really it seemed as if we had descended into another kind of world, and a brighter one, as we rowed forth from Sandford Lock; the river still more shining,

with boats dancing upon its surface; the skies brighter, and the woods more lovely, though, alas! already and prematurely beginning to show the fading hues of autumn. Soon we have passed the far-famed Sandford Lasher, and with that we glide beyond the usual range of the clerks of Oxenford. And then we pass under the lovely woods of Nuneham Courteney, and presently, just beyond the railway-bridge, over which the Oxford express is just now thundering, on its way to Paddington, there we see the spire of Abingdon in the distance, a distance not very great indeed; the same spire that we made out faintly from Faringdon Folly—"Weeks ago now, it seems," declares Claudia.

Now, Abingdon is one of those riverside places that show to best advantage from the river, with its bridge and church, and the little settlement that has grown up beneath the church—the rural church of St. Helen's, that is—which stands pleasantly not far from the river-bank, surrounded by its quaint old church-houses—almshouses, in fact. A grand, roomy old church, with a vast store of monuments and tablets, bearing witness to the former existence of a wealthy, liberal middle-class, of merchants and traders; later in date than the abbot and his monks, but dying out for the most part before the middle of the last century. So that we may believe there was little exaggeration in the description of the old writer who describes Abingdon as a famous city, goodly to behold, full of riches, encompassed with very fruitful fields, green meadows, spacious pastures, and flocks of cattle abounding in milk.

Pleasant is the scene from the river, with the quaint riverside inns, the canal opening out just above with a group of bright-coloured canal-boats, and those old almshouses, with their long gardens, where scarlet-runners and cabbages seem to strive with each other in luxuriance of growth, looking quite tempting and inviting. A piazza of carved oak in front affords a lounging-place for the old people, with charming oak settles to rest their weary bones. Indeed, the wealth of Abingdon in oak settles is something remarkable. We find them in the church vying with the fine carved roofs in exciting the covetousness of beholders. Wherever a place can be found for it is placed an oak settle, dating evidently from the days when the good people commemorated in the storied urns and monumental busts were alive,

and keeping house in good old-fashioned style. To return to the almshouses; we were delighted to find in the spandrils of the oaken archways quaint little paintings of pre-Elizabethan days, touched up, no doubt, and restored from time to time, but still substantially the same. Here is Edward the Sixth, in his well-known bonnet with the feather, and other dignitaries of the period; and within is a quaint little hall with fine oak panelling, where the business of this ancient foundation of Christ's Hospital is transacted.

It is said that the prosperity of Abingdon began at the time of the erection of Burford and Culham Bridges, said to have been decreed by Henry the Fifth shortly before his death, the building of these fabrics having caused the high-road from Gloucester to London to be turned through Abingdon; but Mr. Pyecroft agrees that mere wayside traffic is not sufficient to account for the wealth and prosperity of Abingdon, nor for its decline, which had taken place long before the time of railways.

But thus, Abingdon, as well as a riverside, has a wayside town, with ancient inns and old houses scattered along the chief thoroughfares; a town that has hardly changed a bit since the last guard blew his last blast on the last mail-coach for the western road. No, nor for long ages before, judging from the ancient inns aforesaid, some of which bear the arms of the still more ancient abbey. There are few towns, indeed, so rich as this in old timbered houses, and, indeed, in old constructions of all kinds, although, from its having spread itself along the highways, and never having been belted in and forced upwards by walls of defence, it wants something of the element of picturesqueness.

And then, again, there is the Abbey town—the beginning and meaning of Abingdon—and this begins in the market-place itself, with its tall, fine market-house that domineers over the neighbouring houses—an open, cheerful-looking market-place, and in one corner a severe-looking old church, and at the side of that the fine gateway of the old abbey. But all looks so dark within the abbey precincts, that we determine to put off our visit there to the next day. And, indeed, the Pyecrofts have established themselves comfortably in one of the hotels in the market-place, and dinner is waiting for those who have fared along the shining river.

## A CRUISE IN THE MOZAMBIQUE.

### IN THREE PARTS. PART II.

ON our voyage from Praslin, Seychelles, to the Comoro Islands in the Mozambique, we again passed through the Seychelle group; Aride Island—no misnomer—and Silhouette, a charming fertile mass of orange-groves, being new to us. At sea the sounding apparatus was constantly at work whenever we were in the vicinity of any supposed danger; in these unsurveyed parts of the ocean, a coral reef or island, previously unknown, may crop up anywhere. It was rather terrible to be awoke in the middle of the night by "Old" Giffard hurriedly reporting, "Twenty fathoms, sir. Rock!" One hardly comprehended how deep it really was, and the general idea that presented itself to my half-awakened senses, was, that we should strike immediately. When in the latitude of Quiloa, off the African coast, a violent squall of wind and rain came on, with curious regularity, each night in the middle watch, on one occasion catching us at night-quarters, guns adrift and skylights off, and a nice wetting I got in the cabin. The African shore here is a low line of coast, with a range of mountains far inland, a fringe of cocoanut-trees, washed by the sea, being the sole verdure in sight. Here and there a small dhow harbour exists, little suspected, except by the experienced dhow-catcher. A day's sail from Cape Delgado, we sighted the high peak of Comoro, distant seventy miles. I was looking out brightly for it somewhere about the horizon where land is usually first made out, when it was suddenly pointed out to me up above all the clouds, high in the sky, and there was the lofty flat-topped peak, eight thousand feet above the sea, like Jan Mayen in Lord Dufferin's book, *High Latitudes*. By night and day the very sharpest look-out was kept for slavers, or dhows, the vicinity of Delgado being a very likely place.

The Comoro Islands are four in number—the old charts put a fifth, which, however, does not exist—nearly midway between the northern point of Madagascar and the African coast. Comoro, the largest, is under various native chiefs; Johanna, the next in extent, under a sultan, but much subject to England and the consul, who owns a large sugar-estate at Pomony; Mohilla, with a native queen, is dominated by the French; and Mayotta is wholly French, with a

governor and garrison. Daylight revealed the island of Johanna on our port bow. Its peak is rarely seen, except in early morning; being more than a thousand feet higher than the other mountains, it attracts the clouds, and is generally wrapped in a thick vapour.

Innumerable cone-shaped hills shot up, one behind the other, mounting into the sky; some, sharp as needles, rose sheer out of the sea. Thus early, they were capped and softened by lakes of fleecy clouds, half shrouding the lovely rose-tipped peaks, purple, and violet, and grey, like the yashmack of a Turkish beauty. Soon a faint greenish-grey tint took the place of the purples and mauves, and as day fully dawned, deep fissures and clefts, tumbling streams and shaded valleys, all clothed and fringed with lovely tropical verdure, were revealed to sight. Johanna exactly resembles a comparative view of the mountains of the world in the atlas of our childhood. It is the healthiest of the group, though when a visitation of cholera occurs, many are the gaps it leaves behind. Nearing the land, Saddle Island, and a peculiar low notch to the right of the highest peak, and dog's-ears, denoted the harbour of Pomony, whither we were bound.

There is no bay, but to all appearance an open roadstead; on each side of the entrance a reef juts out, with a narrow winding passage between. In the very middle of this passage is a coral patch with one, two, and three fathoms upon it. Passing the right-hand reef I could have thrown a biscuit upon it from the bridge. A series of—to me—wonderful manœuvres with the engines, spanker, and boom, had the effect of turning a sharp corner, with our bow into the tiny harbour, where we moored. The first person to board us was the King of Johanna's father-in-law, Seyd Drayman, commonly called "Seydi," an Arab of fine presence, who solicited our washing. Landing on the beach, which was no beach at all, but a confused heap of enormous round blackish stones, upon which a surf generally broke, I hopped on shore from stone to stone, pursued and overtaken by a small crested wave, that just caught me. Crowds of mild-eyed, lightish-brown women were collected to see me land, chattering and smiling, and presenting their fat little coffee-coloured babies to be admired; the men appertaining to them were all at work at Mr. Sunley's sugar-factory, where, though little

ground is suitable for its cultivation, what is grown is of excellent quality. Coffee also flourishes here, and will probably form the wealth of the future, clinging as it does to the steepest mountain-sides. We walked and climbed—glad, indeed, to be ashore once more—up the course of the river, which babbled at the bottom of a deep ravine, among enormous boulders of grey stone, smooth with the water of ages. The dark stream is overhung with tree-ferns, magnificent stephanotis, monkey ropes, and calmias; the sides are perfectly steep, the vegetation falling down like a curtain on a wall about a hundred feet deep. It gives an air of mysterious gloom to these ravines, not a little melancholy, but you can always find a cool place in which to rest, even in the hottest noon-day.

With the wind on shore, crossing the bar of the river is a risky proceeding, little to my taste. You go in on the breast of a great surf, which may, or may not, last you in, and are flung up on the beach smothered with foam. I always expected to meet the fate of the captain of the *Lyra* and good Bishop Mackenzie, who, when crossing this bar, were cast into the boiling surf, and their boat shivered to pieces. The bishop had his best clothes on, too, which was very hard. The bow of their white whaler, stuck upright in the sand, confronted me each time I landed. Pomony harbour, during the greater portion of our stay, was hardly a correct term for the little reef-locked basin in which we lay. High-water springs cause the sea to roll in over the outside reefs without breaking; with anything like a strong wind, the sea was tremendous for a harbour. We laboured and rolled heavily, shipping several seas into our ports. Seydi Drayman paid us a visit each day, and was not consoling. "This-e no worser at all; worser than this sometime," he observes with a frightful grin, wherein the whites of his eyes all round are visible, and the betel-nut juice runs out of the corners of his mouth. Seydi seems to be the universal news-monger, interpreter, and provider; besides farming out our washing, he is the beef contractor. "Must give good beef," he mentioned casually, "'cause you got your missus aboard."

One afternoon was spent in picking out places for the two new beacons, which when in one, take a ship safely through the entrance, clear of the middle patch. I had to be carried over a swollen river by two highly odoriferous black fellows; one was a most alarming-looking creature, with the

tips of his fingers, feet, and lips dyed of a blood-red colour with henna. Instead of a quid, they put a little lime and a bit of betel-nut tightly up in a leaf, and are continually chewing it.

Landing one night abreast of the ship for my husband to take Alpha Centauri (which was contrary, and disappeared the instant it was wanted), we must have had a most diabolical appearance. Thenight pitch-dark. He, sextant in hand, sitting on a stone with the artificial horizon, a pool of quicksilver before him, into which he was intently gazing; the boat's crew grim and silent, standing by, with one lantern, and myself mute beside him. A miserable Johanna man stood looking at us, horror-stricken, thinking that some terrible incantations were in progress! There is a bottomless lake on the top of the mountains, to which some of the officers went—a most terrifying place to the natives; close by is a lake of pitch, birds without wings, alligators, porcupines, and many affrighting things. Unfortunately I never reached it.

The sugar-plantation at Pomony is a most flourishing industry; it is worked by free labour, but the old slave régime is not quite forgotten; they are certainly, however, happy, cheerful, and well-cared-for, and the women are comfortably and even becomingly clothed. Johanna women have a particularly mild, soft expression, and speak more gently than do aborigines in general. Their huts are of the most sketchy description—house-property here cannot be a very stable investment. The consul's bungalow is cool and airy, spread with abundance of sweet-scented grass-mats, the great native industry of Johanna, in the plaiting of which they show great taste and patience. The material of which these mats are made is a species of guinea-grass, growing often to the height of ten or eleven feet, and very fatiguing to wade among. Mr. Sunley's dwelling was also remarkably free from smells, which so offend one's nose on entering a native house. Outside, in the verandah, sat a coloured woman, lazily shaking a white glass bottle full of milky cream, up and down. It was our breakfast butter being churned in this primitive manner.

Looking out of the port about five a.m. one grey, still morning, my husband thought the coral-patch in the middle of the entrance in good condition for laying down the fine new buoy, which was made by the ship's blacksmith for the purpose. Accordingly he started in his gig, with the pinnace

towing the buoy, and the whaler in company. I established myself with the largest telescope fixed in the port. All at once, on the previously almost calm patch, a great green sea rolled in, carrying the boats on its crest, but not breaking till past them. Another swelling wave, and the whaler was standing on end. I saw the men slip off their seats, and the sea roll right over them, a few dark heads bobbing up and down in the boiling surf being all that was visible. The gig, seeing a great wave rolling towards them, had backed out of it, while the poor whaler went stem on. For a long anxious time—it seemed like an hour—I could see nothing but swelling waves and breaking water between us and the boats. I heard the shouts on deck, "Whaler capsized! 'Way there, second cutter!" and the excited men leaping into the boat at the davits. I thought my husband must be struggling in the sea, and would be hit on the head by the capsized boat. I saw nothing more till "Old" Giffard rushed into the cabin singing out, "The captain is all right, and has picked up the whalers." Again I had courage to look, and saw the said captain in the gig alongside the pinnace, towing the sunken whaler. A smooth interval now showed him coolly sounding on the very spot where she had capsized, and then the pinnace went in; two waves broke over them, but were pigmies compared to the former ones, and when I saw the boats again, the buoy was gone from the stern of the pinnace, and was peaceably surging about on its appointed place. The difficult task was done, and beyond a fright and a wetting, the capsized crew took no bodily harm. There was, however, great lamentation over their caps, every one of them being lost. Now a blue-jacket's cap is the receptacle for his most cherished possessions—money, letters, photographs, are all stowed away in his cap—in one of them a five-pound note had been placed for safety, so that the loss was great.

Poor Giffard! he rose by hard work and the sweetest temper to be first lieutenant of the ill-fated "Captain." My last remembrance of him is seeing his cheery face looking down into our boat from the low deck of his ship at Spithead, wishing us good-bye. A fortnight later the "Captain" was lying at the bottom of the sea a hundred fathoms deep off Cape Finisterre, an imperishable coffin for him and for hundreds of gallant-hearted sailors. In the meagre accounts we have of that heart-



rending disaster, no mention was made of Lieutenant Giffard, but as the ship went down in the middle watch, he was probably asleep in his cabin, coming on deck, as the first lieutenant generally does, in the morning watch. He was beloved and lamented, as were many others in that ship.

Divine service on board a man-of-war is always an impressive sight. Our chaplain succeeded in interesting the men, and they joined in the hymns and responses with hearty goodwill, never looking so bored and sleepy as a country congregation does when the sermon is long. Still, when it came to an end, and the stirring voice of the first lieutenant gave the order to "Pipe down, unrig church!" they flew over the benches with astonishing alacrity to carry out his orders; probably the charms of Sunday "duff," well stuffed with plums, allured them to their messes about that time. At all events, the flag was torn off the pulpit, and consigned to the flag-locker, while the pulpit was folded up, and removed to the carpenter's storeroom before you could look round. Much quiet reading was enjoyed among the men on Sunday afternoons from the excellent ship's library, and the well-thumbed condition of all the religious books showed that when the men did read they liked something serious, spelling over every word in a meritorious and painstaking way edifying to behold. In this quiet voyage, so little incident occurring to interest one, my fortnightly dinner with the ward-room was quite an event. Nearly all of those kindly men have gone to the grave since then, but I never forget their unvarying kindness and cordiality.

Taking advantage of a low tide, when the reef was a little out of water, I put on a bathing-dress, and we landed on the coral, wading in the hollows sometimes above my knees. It was like a fairy forest, alive with bright little blue and red fish, whisking in and out of the tiny caverns. I sat down on a huge piece of coral, growing up with a stalk like a mushroom; gathered small sponges off the brain-stone, and delicate pink branches of dead coral lay about to be picked up. None seemed to be growing. A violent shower soon drove us on board. To say it rains gives but very little idea of the sort of way the clouds empty themselves, without taking the trouble to rain in small quantities.

The other islands of the Comoro group now had to be visited, and an audience awaited us at the palace of the King of

Johanna, whose wives, I was told, were impatient to see me. The consul and Seydi Drayman shipped for the cruise; the former dining with us. Seydi brought his own servant, who prepared the rice, ghee, and fish, which seemed to form the only repast he intended to indulge in during the cruise. He would, I was assured, on no account touch any of our food, and his change of raiment consisted of a clean turban, beyond which I am sure there was nothing.

Leaving Pomony, we coasted round the island, coming up with a native dhow laden with slaves. Lieutenant A—— and Seydi, as interpreter, went on board. The ostensible reason (she being under French colours) for boarding her was to inform the fat Frenchman in command that a dhow from Mohilla had been washed ashore at Johanna, apparently capsized in a squall. Ninety-three miserable, skinny creatures were crammed together on the small deck, nearly naked; some crouching on their haunches; some prostrate, horribly sick, and all going into slavery. But, then, she had a French pass, and nothing could be said or done. Seydi remarked, when he came back, "He no give no news at all, he frighten plenty," speaking with a gesture of disgust, and squirting the betel-juice cleverly out of the port. Seydi told me that it was not allowed by the French Government to ship slaves from the coast of Africa to Mayotta, but that dhows brought slaves from the coast of Africa to Comoro; they then sent word to those concerned that slaves were waiting at Comoro to be shipped, and this is how these poor wretches were obtained. The coast round to the town of Johanna is a particularly beautiful one, each mountain clothed to its needle peak with lovely tropical verdure. Light feathery filahoe-trees wave from the highest hill above the town, interspersed with tree-fern, palm, cocoa-nut, and broad-leaved bananas split and torn into streaming flags by the winds of heaven. Sugar-cane, ripe for gathering, looked like a great field of golden grain of gigantic height.

We anchored in the open roadstead in front of Johanna town, opposite the watering-place; a cluster of canoes and dug-outs soon surrounded us, all clamouring for our patronage. The clever way in which the natives managed their outriggers astonished me, as an inch out of the balance capsizes them.

On landing we found Prince Abdullah (the heir-apparent, and the King's brother-

in-law), also the prime minister, both in blue uniform, waiting to receive us, and arrange for our visit to the palace.

We had saluted the Johanna flag with twenty-one guns on arrival, which was returned at uncertain times by the dilapidated old fort during the space of three hours. These Johannese dignitaries brought me "plenty salaam" from the Queen, and said that she wished to see me. We went first to the consulate, an isolated building close to the shore, and picked up the consul, now arrayed in a smart uniform. Seydi and the prime minister, who had changed his blue coat for one of brilliant scarlet, now arrived, and announced that his majesty was ready to receive us. Preceded by these grandees, and escorted by troops of half-naked people, we entered at a narrow door, underneath an arched gateway set in the high grey-stone wall. Being a fortified town it is entirely surrounded by a thick wall of enormous strength and solidity. It has evidently been built with a view to sieges, for loop-holes and battlements are placed here and there. Nowhere are the lanes separating the houses more than six feet wide, causing an indescribably stuffy odour to pervade them.

It being known that we were to visit the King that afternoon, every door as we passed was crowded with faces, gaping and chattering at sight of me. We wound through a perfect Rosamond's Bower, till a dead wall stopped further progress, still narrower and more shut in than the rest. Ranged all along with their backs to the wall, eyes cast down, and presenting arms, were the Johanna army; as we passed them a discordant and deafening brass band struck up a tune (name unknown).

At the very top of a steep flight of steps stood King Abdullah of Johanna, a light-complexioned, middle-sized, pleasant-looking young man, with a small black moustache. He shook hands with us in an easy, graceful manner, appearing much gratified at our visit. The King, princes, ministers, and staff made up a brilliant spot of colour. We were then conducted into the state-room, lined with chairs covered with rich, red Turkish brocade. I sat in a very wide one, evidently intended for the most corpulent, and therefore the most admired guest, and talked to the King, who speaks English with a very good accent. His majesty then went to tell the Queen and the two other great wives that I had come. My husband, the consul, Seydi,

and I went behind some thick, handsome curtains into a dark, narrow, airless room, with a high raised bed at one end, covered with costly stuffs, glittering with gold and silver; beside this was placed a long, narrow sofa, on each side of it a tall brass vase—as big as the jars that concealed the Forty Thieves—into which betel-juice was perpetually squirted. There was no other furniture, not a book, bit of work, or a chair. In the middle of the sofa sat the Queen, Manatéli, a handsome young woman, niece to Seydi Drayman. Her majesty and the second wife, Casabo, who was his daughter, prettier and younger still, were there alone when we entered, and received me very nicely. After a few minutes, Seydi having retired, the third wife, Rokeah, who was not related to him, and whom therefore he could not be allowed to see, came in. She was less handsome than the Queen or Casabo, but was as fair as many Europeans. She bared her arm with pride, to compare it with mine, and there was very little difference. Rokeah alone had a child, a little toddling, joyless-looking girl in a sort of fez, which appeared to have worn all the hair off her head, but who seemed to be the spoiled darling of all three wives. The Queen has a slight Roman nose; betel-dyed lips and teeth; beautiful, soft black eyes, the lids heavily darkened. Her dress consisted of a stiff, gold-embroidered body; a crimson satin skirt, sprigged with gold; a high, square cap; some lace over the shoulders; many rings on her fingers; strings of gold and silver ornaments wound tight round her neck; and about a dozen earrings stuck all up the ear, from the lobe to the top, distorting its shape, and making quite an ugly excrescence, pierced with large holes. Bangles, in great number, wound round the ankles, which, thus displayed, showed how slender and well-formed they were. The dresses of Casabo and Rokeah were almost the same, but rather less handsome.

The King and my husband then went away to palaver about the suppression of the slave-trade, leaving me to the three young women, who sent for an old Malay from the Cape, much resembling the Witch of Endor, who could speak Suahili, and also very respectable English, and proceeded with eagerest interest to question me. This seemed the only form of conversation known to them—a habit not confined to these poor native girls, shut up with jealous care from all participation in the world's amusements or interests. Their

first question was whether my husband had any other wife but me?

Living together, as these three girls do, in the greatest harmony, they appeared to think that to be the sole wife meant a life of loneliness and isolation, and therefore very undesirable. Had I any children? And why not? In vain I reiterated that I had only been three months married. Had I got many handsome clothes? (this related to the neat, close-fitting yachting-suit I wore, which they evidently thought very little of.) Might they see how my clothes were made? So kneeling before me they lifted my gown, and then my petticoat in a most respectful way, greatly admiring my black-and-red striped silk stockings. This inspection over, they asked many highly intelligent questions about our own Queen, and her sons and daughters, seeming to know something about her good and blameless life, as well as her cultured mind. I was sorry that I did not possess a print of the Queen to have presented them with, it would have given them such great pleasure. They then asked a great deal about Lady Grey, who, with the Admiral, Sir Frederick, had paid them a visit in the "Boscawen" the year before. I was then taken up to the flat top of the house, where their mornings and evenings are passed, lying or squatting on sofas and grass-mats. It was high above all the other houses, and commanded a fine view of everybody's doings. It was precisely the same sort of lounge for idle people that King David possessed, when "At eventide David arose from off his bed, and walked upon the roof of the king's house," with the disastrous consequences known to all the world. They showed me a narrow window from which, with the aid of a really good telescope, they had watched me on board the ship, as we came to an anchor. Long, idle, aimless hours are passed by these poor souls looking through this glass upon the outer world, and this even was a concession to the advance of civilisation, which they treasure as their most valuable possession.

I asked whether they worked. No; the slaves and native tailors made their clothes. The only thing, it appeared, in which they did employ themselves was the manufacture of sweetmeats, of which they are inordinately fond, and in going to and fro, closely shut up in litters, and by night, lest unholy eyes should catch a glimpse of them, between a cool country palace in the hills, which they seemed much to appre-

ciate, and the stuffy, pent-up house within the walls of Johanna. The dyeing of their nails and plucking out of superfluous hairs in their eyebrows occupied much time; but, as far as I could learn, they enjoyed very little of the society of their lord and master. These three girls were so intelligent, that I longed to have given them some lessons in working, reading, knitting; but, as they know no other life, perhaps it was better not to unsettle them. I made many enquiries, both of these young creatures, and also through the consul, as to the medical aid obtainable here. A few old women practise "medicine," which means idolatrous superstitions, and the use of a few herbs and simples; but, if anything serious is the matter, these poor native women resign themselves to death, knowing that there is no available human aid. Great numbers of women die in childbirth, I think greatly owing to the inert lives they lead, and linger unaided in tortures till death ends their sufferings, for want of a doctor. What a field for capable, educated women-doctors exists here at Johanna, in common with all Mahomedan cities of the East, where no man would be allowed to see the poor suffering creature, even to save her life!

### MARDON HALL.

A STORY IN THREE CHAPTERS. CHAPTER I.

I SHOULD fancy that nearly every one has heard of Mardon Hall. At least to judge by the number of people I have taken through the rooms, and the courtyards, and the chapel, and the old garden, it seems to me that it must be a very well known place. Everyone considers it extremely beautiful, and folks do say that, if the Duke of Broadland chose to make a residence of it, it would be the handsomest country seat in the county; but he prefers to leave it just as it was in olden times, before his forefathers were made Dukes for their loyalty to King Charles-the Second, so that people may see what a gentleman's house was, outside and inside, three or four hundred years ago.

For my own part, I am "free to confess," to use Aunt Libby's expression, that I have never been able to see anything wonderful or striking about the place. I was born, as you may say, in the shadow of it, at the farmhouse which the late Duke built close to the old house, and day after day I and my brothers ran in and out of the great gateway, and played in the



quiet courtyards, and hid in nooks and corners of the staircases, and screamed and shouted in the banqueting-hall, and ran races through the long ball-room, and dug the borders of the old-fashioned flower-garden, growing used to it all as I grew from a tiny child to a big girl, and from a big girl to a young woman, so that it seemed to me just natural and part of my everyday life, as children who live in town get used to seeing carriages and horses, and are not surprised at shop-windows.

But as time went by, and when my two brothers had gone away—Michael for a soldier and Jim to America—I felt very lonely at Mardon, and so came to have something nearer to dislike than indifference for the Old House, as we always called the Hall. It was the duty of some one from our farm to show Mardon to the visitors who came to see it. Naturally they couldn't go through the place alone; they wanted some one to point out the different old curiosities, and to tell some of the history of the rooms.

My poor mother used to do this when I was a wee thing trotting at her side, but she died when I was only six years old.

Our Aunt Libby, father's eldest sister, came to manage for us then, but by the time I was put into long frocks and a bonnet for Sundays, she was getting too rheumatic to go through those cold, deserted rooms and long, draughty passages, four or five times a day. So I had to learn by heart all there was in the dusty, little brown book, called *An Account of Mardon Manor House in Darkshire*, and take the duty of guide upon me.

At first I rather enjoyed doing it. It gave me a feeling of importance, and it was amusing to see the different sorts of people who came, from lords and ladies down to parties of workmen to look at the masonry, and bands of Sunday-school children out for their annual treat. But by degrees I got very weary of repeating the same story in the same words, and of going through the same performance so often. I left off watching for carriages to drive through the park, and began instead to watch for them not to come, till at last nothing irritated me more than the sound of the bell which hung by the gateway, summoning me to take my keys and go my round.

When Aunt Libby scolded me for loitering about, I always used to say that it wasn't worth while settling down to work in the afternoons, since I was nearly sure

to be called away. But, in reality, I didn't trouble myself much about household matters, because I didn't like such things, and found it more pleasant to leave them to Aunt Libby. I spent a great deal of my time and all my energy in the curious square garden on the south side of the old Hall. My father used sometimes to help me with the heavy part of the work, but I sowed every seed and planted every flower that grew in it, and it was my pride and delight that all the year round I was never without flowers. When I was not actively employed in my garden, I used to sit under the great spreading apple-tree that shaded half the grass-plot, while I read for the tenth, or twentieth, or fiftieth time one of the few books that made up our scanty library at Mardon Farm. I had not had much education. Aunt Libby thought very lightly of all knowledge which had nothing to do with having the linen as white as snow, the furniture polished like glass, and the butter and cheese of the first quality. Everything beyond this she called "fal-lals."

I learnt reading, writing, and sums at the parish schools; and then for about a year I went as a day-pupil to a "ladies' seminary" in Bankwell, where I learnt to call a great many things vulgar and low which I had looked on as perfectly respectable before, and where the word "genteel" was considered the highest term of praise that could be given to any girl. I learnt a great deal there, not from books or of the subjects which we were supposed to study, but from what I saw and heard around me. The result of my new knowledge was that I felt as if life was scarcely worth having, if one did not learn to play the piano, or to say French verbs, when one had to wear unfashionable frocks and hats, and had to answer to the name of Nancy Watson. That unfortunate name Nancy! What a distress it was to me! I always wondered how anyone could have been so ill-advised and perverse as to call a child, whom her mother had named Angela, Nancy. You see my father and brothers considered Angela too fine a name for everyday use, and from Annie they had got it round to Nancy, and Nancy I was always called, though I made many a stand for my right to Angela. This was always the first grievance on my list when a discontented fit came over me, which was pretty often; for, since my training at the Bankwell boarding-school, I took a kind of melancholy pleasure in grumbling



to myself over the terrible distance that lay between me and gentility.

In a general sort of way, this is what my life had been until the spring that Mr. Dallas painted his pictures of Mardon, which have since become so famous. Before he came, the Duke sent a letter to my father, to ask him to have a friend of his—the Duke's, I mean—as a lodger for a few weeks, telling him at the same time that Mr. Geoffrey Dallas had his permission to paint in any part of the building where people who came to sketch were not generally allowed. We knew very little at Mardon Farm of what went on in the world, and so we had never heard of Mr. Dallas, the great painter. Not that our knowing him to be a great painter would have placed him nearly so high in our estimation as the Duke's expression, "a friend of mine," which was naturally the best guarantee a stranger could bring to us, and the greatest claim to our respect.

My father was a very straightforward, plain-spoken sort of man, so all he said was:

"Well, certainly it shall be so, if his Grace wishes it; the gentleman can come, but he must understand he comes among plain folk who aren't in the habit of letting rooms and waiting on gentlepeople."

But Aunt Libby and I thought a great deal more about it than my father did. Aunt Libby was what she called "moithered" at the thought of bringing the best parlour into everyday use for Mr. Dallas, of serving his hot dinner on her polished table, and having crumbs dropped on her carefully-kept carpet; but where else could he have his meals? So Aunt Libby resigned herself after many murmurs, which was more than I did when my father said:

"Nancy, lass, it isn't much you do about the house; when Mr. Dallas comes you'll have to stir a bit, and help your aunt, and save her the extra work."

I made no answer, not being accustomed to contradict my father's wishes, but I made up my mind beforehand that it would be quite unbearable to have to wait on this stranger, and carry his trays as if I were a servant.

The Duke had not said when Mr. Dallas might arrive, so, as we ourselves never did anything without a long expectation beforehand, we began to look forward to his coming in much the same way as we thought of Christmas as soon as Michaelmas was turned. However, in three days after the Duke's letter the visitor was with us, and

we had not got over our first surprise before he had made himself quite at home among us, making friends with us all by his gay, pleasant manner. Aunt Libby was completely charmed with him from the very first moment, for he quite scouted the idea of eating his meals in the best parlour.

In the first place, he said, he could not think of using our parlour for a dining-room, and, in the next place, as he very much disliked eating alone, he should be greatly obliged to us if we would let him have his breakfast and supper with us. His dinner—or lunch, as he called it—he generally took at his work. He was so free and open in his manner that we all quite forgot he was anything so grand as a friend of his grace, and he never reminded us of it by any mention of the great folk he knew.

It was while the awe of his first appearance was upon me that I showed him over the old house, and I went through the names and dates that I had off by rote even more shyly and awkwardly than usual, until we got into the chapel where I was accustomed to say:

"This sacred edifice was erected by one Roger Mardon, and dedicated to the Holy Rood, in 1459, in expiation of the crimes of sacrilege and fratricide. He bequeathed the sum of sixteen shillings yearly that masses might be said for the repose of his soul, and the souls of Lionel and Ralph Mardon, his brothers, and of Dame Lettice Mardon, his wife."

When I had edified him by this history, of which I scarcely understood a single word, he said:

"You must get very weary of repeating the same words so often, don't you?"

I ventured to look at him when he said this, and I met such a kind, frank gaze from his large blue eyes, and such a pleasant smile on his handsome face, that I found courage to say exactly what I felt:

"Yes, sir, I do get very tired of it; you see, I say it sometimes more than a dozen times a day."

"Well," he said, as he looked slowly round the chapel, and then brought his gaze back to me, "don't trouble to do it for me; if you'll just come and unlock the doors for me, and warn me of the pitfalls, I'll let my imagination do the rest."

I didn't quite understand what he meant by pitfalls, but I was very glad to be excused from my usual list of explanations, so I went with him willingly enough, especially as he did not let his imagination describe the places to himself only.

He began with the chapel, and made a kind of story of the people who had been there to worship, and what they looked like, and what they did; and as we went from one part of the old house to the other, he went on, till it sounded just like reading a book; and though he was talking about such solemn, dusky old places, he was so droll and lively, that I could not help laughing a great deal, though I felt at first as if I was very forward to take such a liberty.

When at last we had passed through all the rooms and stood outside in the garden, which was my particular pride and care, I said:

"Dear me, sir, however did you get to know so much about Mardon?" for he had told me of a ghost and an elopement, and an old sorcerer, and a wicked step-mother who tried to sell her step-daughter to some gipsies.

"Did you fancy I was going over sober facts?" he asked, looking at me with a very droll expression in his eyes; "I have been romancing."

"Romancing, sir?" I asked, feeling half ashamed of myself for not understanding him; "what is romancing?"

"It's a fancy name, Miss Nancy, for the pernicious habit of inventing untruths; and yet," he added, perhaps because I looked so puzzled, "I may have been nearer the truth in some ways than you'd think."

"Not about the ghost, sir," I said solemnly; "not about the ghost; there's no ghost here."

"Isn't there?" he said with an expression of doubt in his voice. "Are you quite sure there isn't? You see, you can't exactly know, for you must be always occupied with your beauty-sleep in the business hours of ghosts."

I wasn't ready enough to answer this before he began to praise the beauty of the garden, and when I told him it was mine he praised it still more, and asked me if I could spare him a rose. I felt so pleased and proud that I could have spared him a dozen, for no gentleman, or lady either, for that matter, had ever been so friendly and pleasant with me, while I was showing the house, as this friend of the Duke's, who I had imagined would be such a very terrible person. It was after this that I began to forget that Mr. Dallas belonged to the great world, or that I had ever been looking forward to his coming with ill-will.

Mr. Dallas lost no time in setting to work at his painting the day following

his arrival. I was very curious to see how he set about anything so wonderful as making pictures fit to hang in rooms, so I offered to carry something for him to the great banqueting-hall, hung with old banners and armour, where he intended to begin. He looked at me for a moment, and then said with his usual smile:

"No, thank you, Miss Nancy; I'm quite used to carrying all my paraphernalia myself, but if you like to come and watch me set them up, do."

I suppose he saw my curiosity in my face, for, as he arranged his easel, he explained and showed me all his things.

When his canvas was ready, he took a piece of charcoal and sketched a few lines so rapidly, that I could scarcely believe he was beginning anything so serious as a picture. I wanted to ask him if he minded my staying a little longer, but while I was thinking how I should say it, and standing first on one foot and then on the other by way of getting more courage to speak, Mr. Dallas said:

"Don't go away, Miss Nancy, unless you have something which you are obliged to go and do. I like to have someone near me while I am painting."

"Oh, thank you, sir," I exclaimed with quite a burst of delight; "I want to watch you so much."

He looked up at me from his drawing.

"You look as if you expect to enjoy yourself," he said; "I hope you won't be disappointed."

"Oh no, sir," I hastened to assure him; "I shall not be disappointed, I know, because I shall like to watch how you do it."

He gave his head a little shake that might mean anything, as he smiled again. He scarcely ever looked at you without a smile, and such a pleasant one, too. I know I was a foolish girl, for I began to feel there and then as if I could never be thankful enough to him for having come to Mardon to smile at me like that. I had seen nothing of the world, you see, and so I was easily charmed; besides, he was so handsome, that he might have charmed a wiser body than I was by his face alone. His bright chestnut hair was short and crisp round his square, straight forehead, his eyebrows were beautifully formed, and his eyes were dark-blue. He had a straight, rather short nose, and as he wore none of his beard, but a drooping moustache, you could see his delicately rounded chin, which might almost have been a woman's. When I looked at him

I used often to think how proud his mother and sisters, if he had any, must be of him.

"Have you always been able to paint?" I asked as I watched his rapid progress.

I did not mean to say that exactly, but I could not find words just such as I wanted to express my surprise.

"No, no," he said, shaking his head gravely, as he took his palette on his thumb and began to squeeze some colours on to it; "I had to serve a long apprenticeship before I could paint."

"An apprenticeship, sir!" I cried. "Why, you were never apprenticed, were you? I thought it was only grocers, and tailors, and such people who were apprenticed to begin with."

"Well, a long course of study, if you prefer that way of putting it," he said, laughing at me; "or a schooling. Any way, I had to learn, for no one becomes a painter without taking a good deal of pains to learn many things."

"But doesn't it make you feel very wonderful," I asked, my admiration for the process I was watching finding no limits, "to think that you are able to put down things that take up so much room on a small frame like that, and make them look quite real with a few strokes?"

"H'm!" he said, leaning back in his chair, and smiling, as if my simplicity amused him very much; "if I were the only person in the world who could paint pictures, I might feel 'wonderful.' But, you see, there is no lack of painters—good, bad, and indifferent; so one gets used to the miracle of making a picture."

I couldn't think how anyone could get so accustomed to such a romantic thing as painting as to think lightly of it. For my own part, I thought Mr. Dallas had found just the right word when he said the "miracle" of painting.

"When your first curiosity is satisfied, Miss Nancy," he went on, bending to his easel again, "you'll look on my occupation as very commonplace, and perhaps even you'll begin to consider it as rather dirty work."

But that I never did, though I soon got quite used to seeing Mr. Dallas in one part or another of the old house or its surroundings, with what he called his "paraphernalia" around him. I never passed him without his calling me to come for a little talk.

Sometimes, when I had a party of visitors, he would say: "Shall I come and be showman, Miss Nancy?" And

then he would leave his easel and go all round with them, having a fresh set of stories ready for each occasion.

I began to think of the place at last as having been once inhabited, and even took to imagining to myself what the place must have looked like in those old times that Mr. Dallas described so well. Sometimes when I was busy with my garden he would come to me, to stretch himself a little, as he said, and refresh himself.

My brown studies among my flowers had now changed very much. I was nearly always thinking of something or other Mr. Dallas had said to me, or of something I wanted to say to him, and I watched for his coming almost without noticing that I did. I felt as if I was always expecting something pleasant, the minutes he spent with me being the one thing that was more delightful than the recollection of them. I do not remember that he ever tried to gain my confidence, but I gave it to him completely as I had never given it to anyone before. Sometimes in the evening, when I was sitting under the apple-tree watching the stars come out, he would stroll through the vaulted stone-passage which led past the chapel from the courtyard; and then, while we sat together on the rustic seat or strolled up and down the terrace, I told him all about myself, and all that I longed for and hadn't got, talking of myself as some young people will talk—that is to say, as if their listener had exactly the same feelings about them as they have themselves, and as if there was not a more interesting subject in the world. I even told him my dislike of being called Nancy, instead of Angela.

"Well!" he said, looking at me with his pleasant smile as I touched on this terrible grievance—he had a way of saying "Well!" with a little pause after it—"I don't think I'm quite of your opinion. Angela is a very pretty name, but for my own part I would prefer to have a Nancy running about the house and pouring out my tea."

"Do you like the name Nancy then?" I said almost incredulously; "it seems to me so very common, so very—I don't know exactly what to call it."

"So undignified, perhaps you mean," he said, "but I like it all the same; in fact, I think it is one of my favourite names for a girl."

After that I grew quite fond of being called Nancy, quite proud that the name had fallen to my lot, for his approval or

disapproval was quite enough to change my opinion on that or any subject. I never reasoned to myself about the nature of my feeling for Mr. Dallas, it only seemed to me that as I had never seen anyone like him before, so there could be no one fit to compare to him in all the world. He was never absent from my thoughts. Even when I was not actually thinking of him he seemed to be in my mind, influencing what I said, and did, and thought. I began to have a new standard by which to measure and judge things—namely, what Mr. Dallas would say or think. As to his having any idea of the extent of my idolatry for him or returning my feelings in any way, that never entered my mind. I supposed I was to him merely a rough-haired, overgrown, farmhouse girl to whom he was pleased to show kindness. Nor did I look forward to this state of things coming to an end. It seemed to me as if I could scarcely realise the time before his coming to Mardon, and as to his going away and leaving my life to settle back to its old level, I never gave a thought to that. He was there, and he was invariably kind to me; and the sun shone, and the roses were in bloom, and the birds sang, and it would all go on for ever. It was like the end of a fairy story, where a "happy ever after" fills up every wish and desire. It was like—like nothing else but a girl's first passion for her life's first hero, who has come down to her, as it were, from a sphere far above her own.

## AFTER LONG YEARS.

### CHAPTER III.

THE one person whom, according to Colonel Hamilton, he had left in the world to care for, in the person of his only child, was as bright and sweet a girl as one would meet with in a long day's march. Without being a beauty, or even, according to most people's notions, remarkably pretty, she had a face on which it was undeniably pleasant to look, whilst her figure, even judged by a higher standard, left nothing to be desired. She was not, as Margaret Dunscombe had been in her youth, a girl of magnificent proportions and commanding appearance, but she had her share of grace, and even of dignity, and there was in her smile and in her voice a fascination which had never appertained to the other. There was something so genuine about Mary Hamilton—a simplicity so devoid of silliness, and a gentleness so far removed from weakness, that,

young as she was, she was apt to inspire a certain respect, along with the love and admiration which justly fell to her due. She was a good girl in every sense of the word, and she was a bright girl, too—full of innocent fun and animal spirits, and looking out on life with happy, undimmed eyes, such as befitted her few years and sunny experiences.

For hers had been a happy life. The kind people, cousins of her father's, to whose care she had been entrusted for the last ten years, had done all in their power to make up to her for the absence of her parents; and her mother's death, though it had shocked and saddened her, had, naturally, not so affected her as it would have done had they been longer together. She had, indeed, in her English home, all the freedom and affection which could have fallen to her share under her father's roof; and she had grown up, taking it, as it was given, as a matter of course. Of the two boys and four girls who gathered round the well-spread board at The Cedars, South Kensington, the Indian cousin was certainly not the least indulged and beloved. Moreover, very much to her own advantage and to that of others, she had, thanks to her position there, never realised the fact that she was an only child, to be humoured, and applauded, and—literally and deplorably—spoiled.

Her father and she, upon that last visit of his, to which allusion has already been made, had been mutually charmed with each other, and one of the consequences of his outspoken delight in her, was an invitation for her to visit certain old friends of his in Lanarkshire. They were quiet, elderly people, living quite in the country, in what they themselves had candidly described to Mary as a lone part; but they were anxious to see her, and she to see Scotland, and so it happened, as the fates would have it, that Steenie Ellerton, coming suddenly on his long-promised visit to his friend Mackenzie, made the acquaintance of Mary Hamilton. The two places—neither of them very extensive—abutted on each other, and there existed between the families an old friendship, which, on the part of the only permanent youthful element at Birk's Foot—the laird's granddaughter, Lucy Macpherson—seemed to Steenie in the right way to ripen into a warmer feeling for his host; and, thanks to this, and to the absence of other society, the four young people—the men at Glenartney and the girls at Birk's Foot—were



thrown a good deal together. Mrs. Macpherson did, indeed, make a feint of playing propriety, but she had neither the time for nor the habit of playing duenna, and was very glad, moreover, that her guest's month in Scotland should be so easily enlivened. So they fished and they boated; they managed to get a little party together, scouring the country for miles round to do it, for a picnic or two; they rode, one and all of them, upon anything they could lay hands on above the rank of a cart-horse; they got together in the evenings, and lounged about amongst the flowers, and sang Scotch ballads in the drawing-room, and were all as happy as the day was long, and seemed, somehow, to be always all together, and yet always in couples.

It was only natural that it should end as it did. From the first, the young men were friends and confidants in the matter. Mackenzie told Steenie, before the latter had seen anything of either girl, that he had had half a mind, for some time past, to pop the question to his bonnie, blue-eyed little neighbour, and it was not long before the Englishman found himself the object of a constant fire of chaff, on account of Miss Hamilton.

"If I go in for the one, old chap, are you game for the other?" the young laird would enquire seriously as they walked home at night, and—

"What a blessing it would be if you would talk sense, just for once, for a change!" his companion would reply testily; but as time went on, though the question did not vary, the answer would.

"What is the good of talking?" Steenie would say. "If I were as well off as you are, there is no telling what I might do;" whereupon Mackenzie would exhaust his eloquence in the attempt to prove that, according to all the laws of probability, his friend would end by being a richer man than himself. "And she likes you. I can tell it by the very way she laughs at you," he would add conclusively. "She never laughs at me like that."

Yes, she liked him. He felt that; but whether she did more than like him—it was that he was dying to know. And there was only the one way of getting to know it—a way he was not sure he had any right to take. He could keep a wife, it was true, but could he keep her as Colonel Hamilton's daughter might reasonably expect to be kept? He thought little, if anything, of his aunt in connection with it.

She had so indulged him all his life, he never doubted her acquiescence in anything that should be for his happiness; but he did think, and think seriously, of ways and means.

When it came to the push, however, he could not leave her without speaking. For one thing, Mackenzie himself took the fatal plunge, and certain confidences, which had passed between the two girls at an earlier stage of the intimacy, being imparted thereupon to the betrothed of the one, were not long in reaching the admirer of the other.

Mr. Stephen Ellerton, adjured to "go in and win," did at last—after all, it was sufficiently quick work, if you come to think of it!—try his fortune. If he was a little disappointed at the reception his suit met with, it was more Miss Macpherson's fault than his own. She had built too much upon the candid liking expressed by her friend, and had magnified it into something much bigger.

"I do like you," Mary Hamilton said, with a smile and a blush. "But as to loving you—that is another thing. There has not been time—I don't know—I cannot say, whilst you are still here, what I may feel when you have gone away—I cannot be sure of myself, and how can you be sure that, once away from this place and all that has made it so pleasant, you will think any more about me?"

All this she stood to, and more to the same effect, and Steenie, unable to move her further, had to be satisfied with permission to write to her again after three months, should he find himself still in the same mind. In the meantime, it was her wish that he should keep his own counsel as to what had passed between them, and to this he readily agreed, for who could tell whether she would be kind or cruel, when the time came? So they parted with no unusual demonstration on either side, and the last look he had of her face showed it as bright and blithe as though they were to meet again on the morrow.

He got home in time to make one at Nellie Bevan's wedding, which was of the quietest and most unpretentious, neither after the bride's own heart nor after that of the public at large. Nellie had been very anxious to have "the thing," as she expressed it, "well done," and under ordinary circumstances her will would have been law, but that failure in her father's health, to which Miss Dunscombe had attributed the change in his manner, had become more

marked even in the short time which had elapsed since, and the girl could not urge him to an exertion, to which he appeared unequal. On the same account, it was arranged that the young couple should, in the first instance, take up their residence at The Holme, as Mr. Bevan's house was called, and thither accordingly, after the honeymoon—that is to say, early in November—they repaired.

There had been some talk of taking young Stansfeld into the office, but though he had been "articled," as it is called, he had shown so little aptitude for that, or indeed for any kind of work, that it ended in talk, and, indeed, there would have been too many difficulties to contend with for any such arrangement to have answered. Steenie, for his part, found a good deal devolving upon him, and worked well. Nothing could have been better for him than the constant occupation, demanding, as it did nowadays, more than mere mechanical industry. He had really no time to think of himself or his own affairs whilst he was at his desk, and when he did find leisure for a little castle-building later in the day, he was cheered by the consciousness that he was actually on the high-road to fortune. The business capacity in him was asserting itself, and was getting scope, for much that, under other conditions, would have remained in Mr. Bevan's own hands, now perforce fell to the share of the junior partner.

Miss Dunscombe went on, as she had done for so many years, it could not be said cheerfully, but quietly and resignedly. Very often Steenie felt tempted to break his promise to Mary Hamilton, and tell her how his happiness (as he took it) hung in the balance; but he did not yield to the temptation, and when one morning in December, on his way to the office, he dropped a letter, the writing of which had kept him up into the small hours, into the pillar-post, nobody but himself knew anything about it or its contents. Most people who read this have known in their time—or, being still young, have yet to know—what the state of his mind was during the succeeding forty-eight hours, and how hard it must have been to restrain his impatience and keep silence as to that which was uppermost in it, as he sat pretending to read, whilst Miss Dunscombe knitted away in her corner. Once he thought he would go out, as he not unfrequently did, and have a game at billiards either at The White Horse or at one or other of the

houses which were hospitably thrown open to him at all times; but he could not bear the idea of having to make conversation, and so remained where he was. The following evening was more trying still, for there is at West Saxford a special late delivery of London letters, and upon this it occurred to him to build hopes. It was not until the next morning, however, the letter came.

It was not long, nor was there in the wording of it any such ardour and impetuosity as had characterised Steenie's own effusion; but it enclosed Colonel Hamilton's address, and it authorised him to make use of it. It said too, "Cannot you run up and see me? I should like you to know them all now;" and after that, what more could the young man want?

There are moments in life—I will not say that they come to everybody, but let us hope one or two such are granted to most!—when it seems as though the world lay at one's feet; as though one's cup of bliss were full to overflowing. Such a moment came to Stephen Ellerton in the reading of Mary's letter.

And as he read, the separate scrap of paper, on which she had written her father's address, fluttered to the ground and rested at his aunt's feet. She stooped from her seat at the breakfast-table to pick it up, and as she did so, involuntarily her eyes fell upon the name—Lieut.-Colonel Arthur Hayes Hamilton.

"Good Heaven!" she exclaimed, and let it fall, as though it had scorched her. Who knows or can describe what passed through her mind in that second of time, what ghosts rose out of the past, and confronted her; what voices sounded in her ears; what quick beatings told that the heart within her was strong in its life yet, in spite of the years? Outwardly she was calm again, though it was by a strong effort, almost before her nephew had noticed her agitation.

"Why—what—I beg your pardon," he murmured confusedly, his whole heart, eyes, and mind so engrossed in his letter as to render him all but deaf and blind; yet catching, as if in a dream, that sharp cry of distress. "Is anything the matter, Aunt Margaret?"

"It is something you have dropped," she said in a low voice, pointing to the paper, which lay on the ground between them. "I did not know you knew any one of the name?"

Steenie stooped and picked the precious scrap—precious in a twofold sense as

Mary's handwriting and as her father's address—carefully up; then, he turned to his aunt a flushed and somewhat abashed face.

"I ought to have told you before," he said—and told her all. If patience and silence be all that are needed in a listener, then he had the best of listeners. Not even by word or look did Miss Dunscombe interrupt him. The dead silence, after the first burst, began to oppress him; he found himself hesitating and stammering, waiting for a word of encouragement, or, at any rate, some audible sign of her attention and comprehension; none such was granted him; his aunt sat as though she had been carved out of stone, and, so sitting, heard him through.

"The more I thought of her the better I loved her," the young man wound up at last, in a glow of enthusiasm. "And I wrote and told her so. And, Aunt Margaret, this is her letter; you are welcome to see what she says; it will make you love her only to read it, and I am to write to her father by the next mail."

Miss Dunscombe put the letter away from her with a quick movement of her hand.

"I don't want to see it," she said. "I am sorry for you—and for her, for it is a thing that can never be. Oh, Steenie!" and her voice broke and changed suddenly, "you should never have kept it from me. You made the greatest mistake of your life in not telling me."

There was so much pain in her tone and expression, and such an absence of anger, as could not but impress her companion, and it was with a pale face, though with a forced laugh, that he repeated the reasons he had already given for his silence.

"Supposing, after all, she would have had nothing to say to me, what object would have been gained by worrying you about it? Still, had I thought for one moment I should have offended you like this—"

"You have not offended me at all," she interrupted him to say; "it is no question of offence. I have a great deal to say to you, and there is no time for it now. You will be late at the office as it is;" and she rose from the table as she spoke, and bending her head, spoke the accustomed grace.

"I know," Steenie said, rising too; "I am going. But one word before I go, Aunt Margaret. What do you mean—what am I to understand by 'a thing that can never be'? You cannot mean me to take such words as those literally." There was

no hesitation about him now, nor was there any heat. The composure of his manner was not lost upon Miss Dunscombe, and she shivered as though struck with a sudden chill; but she did not flinch from the question.

"I do, indeed," she said. "I told you I was sorry—I am very sorry, but I meant what I said, Steenie. It was no figure of speech. If you were to beg it of me on your knees, I could give you no other answer. It can never be."

He was already at the door, but as she finished speaking, an impulse it would be difficult to define moved him, in spite of the words she had just uttered, to come back and kiss her. It was a sort of pre-remorseful feeling he had—a consciousness of the pain she would have to suffer at his hands, before he should make her yield to him. For it was war he meant, and not peace. He was not minded to sit down tamely, and do as he was told.

"I am at a loss to understand you," he said, with an ominous gentleness; "but whatever it is you mean, you have the day before you to think it out; and remember one thing, Aunt Margaret, I have asked her to be my wife!"

She had the day before her, as he said, and a terrible day it was. It was not merely that the old wound had been so sharply and suddenly probed—it had never healed, as it might have been expected to heal, in all these years—it was not this, but the reflection that after all her care and tenderness and solicitude, after the giving up of her life to him, it should have fallen to her lot to deny Steenie his heart's desire.

It has been said before that Margaret Dunscombe was far from being as grateful as we are in the habit of declaring ourselves, Sunday after Sunday, for our "creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life"; but the rebellion in her heart waxed hotter and stronger than ever, as she thought of this new burden which had been laid upon her.

All these years, she had never wavered in the miserable conviction which had taken hold of her mind upon the night of the murder; all these years, she had looked upon herself as the custodian of a secret which was to go down into the grave with her; and on this account, and because she felt that the West Saxford Mystery was to her no mystery at all, she had always carefully repressed in Steenie any tendency to dwell much upon it, least of all with any hope of solving it. At times, even, she

had bitterly reproached herself for failure in her duty to the wife and child of the murdered man, and it seemed as though his blood did indeed call from the ground and call to her for vengeance; but no torture she could have been called upon to undergo would have unsealed her lips now. Whatever her faults might be, and she had many, treachery was not amongst them.

It was hard to know what to say to Steenie, or how to deal with him. She could not tell him the truth, and yet how, without telling him, was she to bend him to her will?

He had a good heart, and was grateful, and never in his life had he questioned the maternal authority she had exercised over him; but there comes a time when a man ceases to feel himself bound even by his duty to his mother, and this time had come—and come, she could not but confess, later than to most—to her nephew. He would refuse to obey her—she knew it—and what then?

She said to herself that then there would be but one course open: she must write to Colonel Hamilton. She shuddered as she thought of it; not so much at the thought of putting pen to paper to him—though there was a grim irony in the fate which should compel her to that—as at the attempt to realise the gulf which she should thus be fixing with her own hands between herself and Steenie. He was all she had to live for, and he would never forgive her as long as she lived!

She “took in the situation,” as the phrase is, with an utter, hopeless completeness, and had prepared herself for the worst, hours before the young man returned from his work. He, too, had been thinking it out. What his aunt might have in her mind he was at a loss to imagine. But one thing was certain: he had gone too far with Mary Hamilton to draw back, even had his heart not pronounced it impossible.

Thus, with an equal regretfulness and an equal determination upon both sides, the contest began. The very weakness of her case betrayed Miss Dunscombe into a certain bitterness and unreasonableness, and Steenie at last lost both patience and temper.

“It is not reasonable,” he said. “It is not Christianlike to allow a wrong done you in

your youth—before she was born—to spoil the happiness of an innocent girl, whom you have never seen, and who has never injured you. Nor, because her father forgot his obligations as a gentleman and a man of honour—how else am I to understand the mortal offence he would appear to have given you?—is that any reason that I am to follow in his footsteps! If I had known before—if I had not already committed myself so far—I might have drawn back. Aunt Margaret, I would! Though it would have been to repay you with my heart's blood, I would have done it. I do not forget for one moment that your goodness has far exceeded the claim I had upon it—I do not forget it any the more, because it seems to me that you are asking more of me now than you can honestly expect of me. I am ready to do anything I can to meet your wishes, but there are things no gentleman can do, and this is one of them.”

“Very well,” said Miss Dunscombe.

There was nothing threatening, nothing suggestive even, in the tone in which she uttered the commonplace words; it was simply one of acquiescence.

“I don't understand you,” Steenie said, for the second time that day. “Am I to take it for granted you withdraw your—”

He did not like to use the word “objection,” and yet could not think of any other to put in its stead. Miss Dunscombe had risen from her seat, as if to put an end to the discussion, and stood facing him, an expression of unutterable sadness in her eyes.

“If I could have withdrawn it at all, I should never have made it,” she replied simply.

The young man sprang to his feet and seized her hands.

“But, Aunt Margaret,” he cried, “consider! You are forcing me—forcing me, in spite of myself, to run counter to your wishes. I tell you I can't—I cannot and will not write to Mary Hamilton and tell her—tell her,” breaking into a bitter, scornful little laugh, “I don't want her.”

“You cannot and will not, and I cannot make you,” his aunt replied. “There is no more to be said about it between us. I am content to leave it, as you will have it so, to her father.”

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